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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE IRAN-SYRIA-LEBANON TRIANGLE

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Classified By: Political M/C/ Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Russia welcomed the May 21 Doha agreement as an opportunity to put Lebanon on the path toward national reconciliation, but understood that this was a temporary measure to overcome the country's latest political crisis. MFA officials believe the Lebanese factions' decision to avoid the issue of disarming Hizbollah was wise, but acknowledge a seemingly intractable issue remains to be dealt with in the future and warn of increased militarization of Lebanese society. Moscow will continue calling upon Syria and Iran to allow a long-term political settlement in Lebanon, while recognizing that its influence is limited. The GOR will not condition its arms sales to Syria, maintaining that it takes a pragmatic approach that keeps political and economic issues separate. Most analysts and diplomats see Russia attempting to play a helpful role in Lebanon, but doubt Moscow will push Damascus too hard for fear of losing its key Middle East ally. Russia's ability to influence events in the region or rein in Hizbollah are further limited by the complicated nature of Russian-Syrian-Iranian relations. End summary.

Doha Agreement a Positive Step, But Problems Remain

¶2. (C) MFA Counselor for Lebanon Oleg Levine told us on May 23 that Russia welcomed the May 21 Doha agreement that set the stage for a full-fledged agreement that would allow Lebanon to choose a President and form a new government. Ironically, he argued, Hizbollah's show of force over control of the Beirut airport appeared to have been the necessary spark that pushed the Lebanese political blocs toward compromise, ending a months long stalemate. Levine assessed Hizbollah's muscle-flexing as having strengthened its image among Lebanese by demonstrating that it remained the country's only real military force. He thought the Doha agreement aided Hizbollah politically by giving the opposition enough parliamentary seats to block government initiatives aimed at weakening or disarming the organization. Unfortunately, the recent crisis could have the affect of leading other factions to strengthen their militias. Levine thought that Lebanon could now experience "parallel processes" with movement to a political settlement at the same time the militarization of the country increased.

¶3. (C) Despite the continued instability caused by armed militias, Levine said it a "wise decision" to leave the issue of Hizbollah's weapons out of the final Doha agreement. Had the parliamentary majority pushed for this it would have scuttled the talks. Despite GOR support for the Doha agreement, Levine admitted that leaving the issue of weapons for another day made the agreement a stopgap measure that simply helped Lebanon overcome its current crises and did not necessarily move it toward a long-term political settlement.

Russian Influence Limited

14. (C) Levine told us that Moscow would continue to call upon Damascus and Tehran to allow a political settlement in Lebanon, just as the GOR had asked Syria and Iran to help end the recent violence. (Note: The May 16 MFA report of DFM Saltanov's meeting the Iranian Ambassador Ansari underscored a franker than usual GOR message to Iran and Syria. End note.) Russia could, however, only "send a message" as its influence was limited. Levine explained that it would be difficult for Russia to convince either Syria or Iran to lessen support for Hizbollah, both of which depended upon the organization to confront Israel. He did not think that the current Syrian-Israeli negotiations would lead Syria to lessen its support for Hizbollah in the near term, explaining that the negotiations were likely to be drawn out and in danger of disruption if Israel pressed too hard on Hizbollah. Levine said Iran's interests in Hizbollah were to form an "umbrella" to protect Lebanon's Shia and demonstrate Iranian influence in the Middle East.

15. (C) In response to our strong concerns over arms transfers to Damascus, Levine emphasized that Russia would not use its military sales to Syria as a means to increase its leverage over Asad in order to persuade him to play a more positive role in the region. Levine reiterated that Syria was Russia's "traditional partner" in the Middle East, with which it had close political and economic relations. Military sales, as well as energy cooperation, fell under the later category and were kept separate from political considerations. Levine thought it not incompatible for Russia to sell weapons to Syria while it improved relations

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with Israel. If it was, Israel would not be so anxious to improve relations with Russia.

ME Diplomats Split on Russian Role in Lebanon

16. (C) Middle Eastern diplomats in Moscow are divided over Russian intentions in Lebanon. Lebanese Emboffs have consistently complained about the lack of results from Russian attempts to get Syria to end its meddling in their country, and see this as indicative of both the limits of Moscow's influence with Damascus, as well as the GOR's unwillingness to push Asad too hard for fear of weakening its only regional ally. Lebanese First Secretary Nagi Khali told us that the GOR was so anxious to protect Asad that it asked Lebanon to reconsider the formation of the international tribunal investigating the Hariri assassination, which, Moscow knew, would lead back to Asad.

17. (C) Jordanian and Egyptian diplomats believe Russia genuinely is trying to play a constructive role in Lebanon. Egyptian Emboff Wael Badawi said that FM Aboul Gheit called FM Lavrov May 13 and asked the GOR to press Syria to end the recent turmoil in Lebanon because Cairo thought Moscow would respond positively (reftel). Egypt understood, however, that Moscow's influence with Syria had limits. Badawi added that to really change the situation in Lebanon it would be necessary to press Iran - the real power behind Hizbollah - but Moscow's influence with Tehran was even more limited than with Damascus. By way of example of the distance with which Iran kept Russia when it came to Hizbollah, Badawi explained that Lavrov sent Iranian FM Mottaki a personal letter in April asking Iran to help end the political stalemate over selecting a new Lebanese President, but only received a response a month later.

Moscow Sticks With Asad

18. (C) Russian analysts have consistently assessed Moscow's relations with Syria as a balance between encouraging Damascus to play a more helpful role in the region while not

pressing Asad too hard for fear of losing Russia's one real ally in the region. Institute of Middle Eastern Studies President Yevgeniy Satanovskiy argued that the GOR wanted to keep Asad in power as a means to maintain Syria's internal stability; without a strongman Russia was unsure of the direction Syria would take. Georgiy Mirskiy of the Institute of Higher Economics noted that with Saddam's Iraq gone, Syria was the only Arab ally Russia had left. He doubted, however, just how good an ally Syria was considering that Asad "flatly denied" to Russian officials a role in the Hariri assassination and consistently failed to modify Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs. Had Asad done so, he could have helped Russia "save face" by giving Moscow something to show for its efforts in the region. Aleksandr Shumilin, Director of the Center for the Analysis of Middle East Conflicts, discounted the impact of Russian pressure on Syria, which was minute compared to the pressure from Arab states to take a more moderate course and move away from Iran. If Asad could withstand his Arab neighbors, Moscow was easy to handle.

"Complicated" Russia-Iran-Syria Triangle

¶9. (C) Iran specialist Vladimir Sazhin of the Oriental Studies Institute described for us a "complicated" trilateral Russia-Iran-Syria relationship that was formed by a limited number of common interests and typically faced turbulence caused by diverging interests. The Syria-Iran link was particularly complicated by basic differences between religious, Persian Iran and secular, Arab Syria. These countries found themselves together more because of their traditional anti-Americanism and pariah status than common goals. The inequality of their relationship further complicated a situation in which resource-rich Iran had become an independent regional actor and the real power behind Hizbollah. Syria, meanwhile, often found itself isolated within the region and saw its influence with Hizbollah diminished as it became simply a conduit for Iranian supplies to the organization. This situation created difficulty for Moscow, which was closer to Syria than Iran. It was through Syria that the GOR hoped to play a positive role in the region by helping end Lebanon's political troubles and prodding Asad toward a Syria-Israel peace agreement

¶10. (C) Sazhin doubted Russia's ability to influence Iran, and argued that countries with strong economic ties with Iran, including China, France, and Germany, had more concrete

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methods at their disposal to change Tehran's behavior. Sazhin pointed to FM Mottaki's public rebuke of Lavrov's May 15 statement encouraging the P5 1 to offer security guarantees to Iran as a confidence building measure. When Mottaki said within a day that Iran did not require security guarantees from any country, Sazhin thought this demonstrated the actual political distance between Tehran and Moscow.

Russian Press Skeptical of Moscow's Influence

¶11. (U) The press has displayed considerable skepticism of Russia's ability to influence events in Lebanon vis-a-vis Syria or Iran. RIA Novosti commentator Andrei Murtazin asked if Russia could help "save" Lebanon when Moscow's relations with Damascus and Tehran were "far from perfect." He concluded that Lebanon's western oriented government continued to turn to Russia out of desperation to utilize Moscow's few remaining "levers" of influence. In the case of Syria, Russia agreed to write off 70 percent of its Soviet-era debt and remained Syria's largest supplier of arms. With Iran, however, Moscow had little upon which to base its influence except that it maintained the strongest political relations with Tehran of the P5 1 nations. RIA Novosti's Marianna Belenkaya was more circumspect about a

Russian role, commenting instead on the reactions of the U.S., France, Israel and Saudi Arabia to Hizbollah's increasing influence in Lebanon. She doubted Russia could play much of a role to settle the problem in Lebanon or help deliver peace with Israel, which was being handled by Turkey.

Ilya Kononov noted in Nezavisimaya Gazeta that the current Lebanese crisis broke out as Turkey helped get the Syria-Israel negotiating track moving, while Russia, which trumpeted its relations with Syria as its greatest possible contribution to the MEPP, had no part in this initiative and had to look to the Arab League to help solve the current crisis in Lebanon.

RUSSELL